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ABSTRACT

Noting that little has been said about "TV Guide's" performance in telling its readers about television, a study examined how the magazine presented television during the 1970s, a critical period in the development of American television. All "TV Guide" covers from the 1970s were examined, and each cover story was categorized according to the accompanying photograph or caricature. The categories included commercial network programs, syndicated non-network programs, public television programs, and cable or subscription programs. The examination revealed a clear pattern. "TV Guide" gave a disproportionate amount of attention to regular series on commercial networks, while all other categories received little or no coverage. Specifically, "TV Guide" ignored the development of cable television, pay cable, superstations, and subscription television. The magazine also underplayed public television and failed to keep pace with changes in commercial network offerings. (Tables of data are included.) (HTH)

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IGNORING CHANGE: AN EVALUATION OF TV GUIDE COVERS, 1970-1979

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INTRODUCTION

TV Guide is an American magazine success story. It began modestly enough, in 1948 strictly for New York City television viewers. As the American appetite for television developed, TV Guide expanded to national distribution.[1] The formula was simple: wrap a few national articles about television around a comprehensive regional listing of television programs; distribute it both by subscriptions and through sales in supermarkets and convenience stores.[2]

The marketing advantage of a display rack at eye level in supermarket check-out lanes spurred sales. By 1974, TV Guide overtook Reader's Digest to become the largest-selling magazine in America.[3] It has surpassed Time as the leading magazine in gross advertising revenue.[4] Circulation revenues in 1985 exceeded $700 million.[5] Circulation topped 20 million copies for the first time in 1976.[6] Since then, weekly circulation figures have fluctuated between 17 million and 20 million copies.[7]

One would think that such a significant magazine would be the subject of intensive research, but the literature is very scanty. TV Guide was one of four national magazines selected for an analysis of portrayals of the elderly in magazine advertisements; the results were published in Journalism Quarterly.[8] There is a chapter on TV Guide in the textbook, American Maga-

zines for the 1980s.[9] An article by Hal Crowther in The Humanist takes issue with the conservative editorial bent of a television criticism column written for TV Guide by Patrick Buchanan.[10] Precious little has been said, however, about TV Guide's performance in its prime task, telling its readers about television.

The authors want to correct that imbalance by looking at how TV Guide presented television during a critical period in the development of American television, the decade of the 1970s. Since TV Guide sells itself through covers displayed at supermarket check-out lines, the cover story was chosen as the unit of analysis.

The authors examined all TV Guide covers during the 1970s, categorizing each cover story based on the presented photograph or caricature. If the cover was unclear, the story would be examined to determine the proper category. The following categories were used: commercial network regular series; commercial network mini-series, specials, or films; commercials and commercial spokespersons; commercial network sporting events; commercial network news; syndicated non-network programs; public television; cable or subscription programs; broadcast issues; and other (including the Santa covers and Fall preview covers).

A clear pattern quickly emerged. (See attached appendix.) TV Guide gave a disproportionate amount of attention to regular series on commercial networks. All other categories received little coverage. Specifically, TV Guide ignored the development

of cable television, pay cable, superstations, and subscription television; TV Guide underplayed public television and failed to keep pace with changes in commercial network offerings.

CABLE, PAY CABLE, SUPERSTATIONS, SUBSCRIPTION

Cable television, as both a delivery system and a source of alternative programming, grew substantially during the survey period, as the following chart demonstrates[11]:

Year	# Systems	# Subscribers	Percentage of TV Homes with Cable
1970	2,490	4,500,000	7.6
1975	3,506	9,800,000	14.3
1980	4,200	15,500,000	20.0

Overall, in 1979 TV viewers in homes without cable were watching network affiliates for 91 percent of their prime time viewing. In all TV homes the average was 88 percent. However, cable homes clearly were leading the charge against network domination of prime time. In those homes only 72 percent of prime time viewing went to network affiliates, and the trend was for less viewing of the affiliates.[12] The available Nielsen numbers point out a dramatic increase in viewing options[13]:

Number of Stations	Percent of TV Homes That Can Receive Stations/Channels in:		
	1964	1972	1981
1-3	22	6	3
4	19	11	5
5	14	12	8
6	19	10	9
7	12	18	10
8	6	12	9
9	4	11	13
10+	4	20	43

From 1970 to 1979, cable added about one million new subscribers a year.[14] More importantly, it added an array of new options. After some initial experiments with other forms of distribution, Time Inc. made Home Box Office available to cable companies via satellite in September 1975.[15] By 1977, it was turning a profit.[16] By 1979, it was on more than 380 cable systems in 45 states, covering more than 800,000 homes.[17]

Viacom International, Inc., began Showtime in July 1976, by 1979 serving 90,000 subscribers on 50 cable systems in ten states.[18] These subscription services offering recent films grew rapidly in the late 1970s[19]:

Year	# Subscribers
1973	18,400
1974	67,000
1975	265,000
1976	794,000
1977	1,174,000
1978	2,352,000
1979	4,353,000
1980	7,900,000

Satellite distribution also is critical to another cable offering, superstations. It all began with the entrepeneur Ted Turner. On December 16, 1976, he beamed the signal of his Atlanta station, WTCG, later changed to WTBS, via satellite to cable systems.[20] Starting with 24,000 households, Turner's WTBS by 1982 was on 2,100 cable systems and available to 9.5 million subscribers.[21] WOR, New York, and WGN, Chicago, quickly followed Turner's lead to become superstations.[22]

Subscription television, scrambled over-the-air broadcasts

like the pay cable services offering recent films and live sporting events, had a brief heyday during the late 1970s. Wometco Enterprises, Inc., through WTWB in Newark, began subscription broadcasts for the New York City area in March 1977.[23] The same year Chartwell Communications and Oak Industries began the subscription service ON-TV in the Los Angeles area.[24] A competing operation, SelecTV, began a year later.[25] In quick succession, Boston, Detroit, Phoenix, and Cincinnati also gained subscription operations.[26]

The growth in cable, subscription, and other alternative sources of programming was not reflected in TV Guide cover stories in the 1970s. Not a single cable or subscription program made the cover during the decade. In fact, the first cable program to make the cover of TV Guide was Home Box Office's 1984 series, The Far Pavillions.[27]

PUBLIC TELEVISION

Public television also grew during the 1970s, though less dramatically than cable. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting formed the Public Broadcasting Service in 1970.[28] The name change represented an attitude change for an organization which formerly called itself National Educational Television.[29] Early 1970s viewing of PBS amounted to only 0.4 percent of all viewing, according to the A. C. Nielsen Company.[30] By the late 1970s, some 20 to 40 million Americans watched some PBS programming in an average week, about five percent of the

viewing on any given night.[31]

Public Broadcasting's most-watched program, Sesame Street, made its debut in 1969. PBS's first full-scale network season, 1970-1971, included Sesame Street, The Forsyte Saga and Civilisation, from the British Broadcasting Corporation, The Advocates, and Firing Line.[32]

Though not viewed in proportion to its availability, public television nevertheless represents a significant viewing alternative for the vast majority of TV Guide's readers. A 1952 decision by the Federal Communications Commission set aside 242 television channels solely for noncommercial licenses; these public broadcasting stations, now numbering about 285, comprise roughly 27 percent of the U.S. broadcast licensees.[33] TV Guide did very little in the 1970s to highlight PBS programs through cover stories. Only eleven PBS cover stories, representing 2.1 percent of the covers were run during the decade.

CHANGES IN NETWORK PROGRAMMING

Mini-series

Network television programming underwent significant changes in the 1970s. Variety programs and westerns declined in number while situation comedies flourished, but perhaps the greatest change was the introduction of the blockbuster mini-series. A 1976 adaptation of Taylor Caldwell's The Captain and the Kings was one of the first programs in this genre.[34] Another was the February 1976 ABC presentation of Rich Man, Poor Man,

twelve hours of prime-time programming. By September of that year ABC aired a sequel Rich Man, Poor Man--Book II.[35] More than 130 million Americans watched at least one segment of ABC's mini-series Roots in 1977. The final episode was the highest-rated program in television history at that time.[36] The Roots success brought other mini-series efforts such as Holocaust and The Missles of October.[37]

These historical docu-dramas did not seem to affect TV Guide priorities. The pre-mini-series era (1970-1975) saw an average of five covers per year for network mini-series, specials, or films. The mini-series era (1976-1979) had 5.25 covers per year for the same category. Public preference for non-traditional non-series programming clearly was running ahead of TV Guide covers. TV Guide covers did not reflect the debut of the mini-series form in 1976. Mini-series garnered two covers in 1977, two in 1978, and one in 1979.

Temporary Networks and Syndication

During the 1970s alternative and temporary networks developed. The Hughes TV Network created impromptu networks of affiliates for live sporting events; Operation Prime Time did the same thing for network-quality entertainment programs.[38] David Frost put together a one-time network in 1977 of 155 stations to air his interviews with former President Richard Nixon. The first Nixon-Frost interview achieved overnight ratings indicating 45 million viewers, reportedly the largest audience for a news interview in the history of television.

In Los Angeles and Miami it attracted 50 percent of the viewing audience.[39]

Furthermore, several cancelled network shows became very successful in syndication to individual stations. When Star Trek was cancelled by NBC in 1969, the network received 126,518 letters of protest. So it is not surprising the series did well in syndication.[40] Hee Haw, The Lawrence Welk Show, and The Beverly Hillbillies were bumped from network schedules because they appealed to older, rural viewers rather than the advertiser-targeted young urbanites. Each show, however, did well in syndication.[41]

Prime Time Access

The boom in non-network syndication was aided by a 1970 act of the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC mandated that, beginning with the 1970-1971 season, network affiliates in the top 50 markets were forbidden to program more than three hours of network programming in the 7:00-11:00 p.m. period. The previous practice was to program three and one-half hours. This effectively opened up the 7:30-8:00 p.m. time slot in all markets. Off-network re-runs could not be used to fill this slot by order of the FCC. The intent was to force stations to produce local programs or buy high-quality programs.[42]

In practice, however, stations turned to cheap and ready-to-roll programs to fill the slot, notably game shows such as Family Feud. Before the Prime Time Access Rule, game shows occupied eleven percent of the prime time access slot. By the

1974-1975 season, game shows were 65.6 percent of the prime time access programming.[43] The sole exception to this trend was Westinghouse Broadcasting's syndicated P.M. Magazine (called Evening Magazine when aired by a Westinghouse station), a collection of human interest pieces distributed nationally and usually introduced by local hosts.[44]

Whether prime time or fringe time, syndicated programs did well in the 1970s, but could not crack the cover of TV Guide. The decade had a rather steady pattern, averaging less than one cover per year dealing with a non-network or non-traditional network syndicated program.

News and Sports

TV Guide did only slightly better in its cover stories in noting the increased network attention to news and sports. Starting with ABC's coverage of the 1960 Olympics, each Olympiad brought longer and better coverage. In 1970, ABC obtained the rights to air a professional football game each Monday night during the season. Monday Night Football regularly placed in the top-25 in series ratings each year. NBC countered with Monday night baseball broadcasts in 1972; ABC took over the broadcasts in 1976.[45] Each commercial network developed or expanded a weekend magazine-style sports program during the 1970s.[46]

Network news also expanded during the survey period. ABC sought to challenge the morning news/interview domination of the Today show, first with A.M. America, later with the more

successful Good Morning America. Network news hours during 1973-1974 increased substantially due to expanded coverage of Congressional hearings into the Watergate abuses. CBS's 60 Minutes, of course, regularly appeared in weekly lists of top ten rated programs. Late in the survey period, November 1979, the Iranian hostage crisis brought forth a regular late news program, later to be called Nightline, on ABC.[47]

From 1970 to 1974, TV Guide averaged only one cover per year related to news or sports. From 1975 to 1979, this improved to three or four covers per year, still very little in comparison to the weekly news and sports offering. Incidentally, only twice in the decade did TV Guide do a cover story related to the lifeblood of commercial television, the commercials themselves.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the 1970s viewer options increased substantially, but TV Guide clearly failed to keep pace with those changes. Two important aspects of TV Guide's marketing strategy explain the magazine's lethargy in changing its covers to reflect developments in the industry and the changing behavior of television audiences.

Initially, one must realize that TV Guide's failure to highlight subscription, cable, or pay cable programs is directly tied to TV Guide's slow and reluctant inclusion of cable listings. Cable listings slowly crept into the 107 regional edi-

tions of TV Guide in the 1970s, often well behind the availability of those cable signals. The all-sports cable offering ESPN, for example, was in only 15 of the editions by 1980.[48]

Adding cable listings, and hence pages, was not done lightly. Adding one side of a page adds one million dollars to the magazine's costs, according to the current publisher of TV Guide, Eric G. Larson.[49] Even so, TV Guide has moved to correct the dearth of cable coverage and most regional editions now include cable listings.[50] Throughout the 1970s, though, TV Guide properly did not tease viewers by highlighting programs on the cover and not listing program times on the inside pages.

Currently TV Guide publishes between 10,000 and 15,000 pages per week if all the regional editions are added together. Listings for those pages must be known weeks, if not months, in advance. Covers are planned eight to ten weeks in advance, and set five to six weeks in advance.[51] As cable systems and cable programs came and went quickly during the 1970s, TV Guide responded to the tumult with the course of least resistance, ignoring it.

Finally, TV Guide covers directly reflect the fact that 62 percent of the magazine's circulation comes in the form of single copy sales, only 38 percent from subscriptions.[52] The magazine is available at 300,000 check-out counters and newsstands nationwide. Even its Saturday through Friday form of listing programs reflects the importance of Saturday as a day

for grocery shopping.[53]

Supermarket managers, of course, are very fond of TV Guide. As a weekly, it produces a 52-time turnover. It does not have to be price stamped. It produces a 24 percent markup and is fully returnable if not sold. It does not even have to be handled. Wholesalers take care of filling the racks.[54]

TV Guide, in turn, depends on its covers for the impulse buying at the check-out counter. Merrill Panitt, TV Guide editorial director, said there is no mystery in choosing covers: "You're trying to sell magazines, especially so (with) TV Guide because it's a newsstand publication."[55] The network press information specialists agree that a TV Guide cover is the single most important ratings builder. Consequently, the network executives regularly promote their wares to the editors and publishers of the magazine.[56] In such an environment, the safest act is to choose a celebrity from a popular series for the cover.

Overall, TV Guide covers during the 1970s were the natural consequences of a process which worked well in satisfying TV Guide executives, network executives, and supermarket managers. TV Guide held such dominance in its field and in magazine circulation that it not only was able to survive and grow, but also actually made a virtue out of trailing its readers in regard to their viewing options and preferences.

APPENDIX

TV GUIDE COVERS, 1970-1979

Category	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979
Commercial network regular series	34	35	34	32	33	30	34	28	30	32
Commercial mini-series	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	1
special,	4	7	5	4	0	2	5	3	2	2
film	0	1	0	2	3	1	1	1	0	2
Commercials	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Sports	0	1	1	1	2	3	4	4	3	4
News	2	1	2	0	1	3	3	4	2	4
Syndicated programs	1	0	1	1	0	1	1	2	1	0
Public broadcasting	0	3	2	1	1	1	0	2	0	1
Cable/ subscription	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Broadcast Issues	1	0	2	5	4	3	1	3	6	2
Other	10	4	5	4	7	8	3	4	5	4
Totals	52	52	53	51	52	52	52	52	53	52

NOTES

[1]Edward Jay Whetmore, Mediamerica (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., Inc., 1979), p. 75.

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[4]Warren K. Agee, Phillip H. Ault, Edwin Emery, Introduction to Mass Communications (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1985), p. 161.

[5]Borowski, p. 28.

[6]Whetmore, p. 75.

[7]Borowski, p. 28.

[8]Brian Kvasnicka, Barbara Beymer and Richard M. Perloff, "Portrayals of the Elderly in Magazine Advertisements," Journalism Quarterly, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Winter 1982), pp. 656-658.

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[11]Television Digest, A. C. Nielsen, TV Guide figures cited in Jay Black and Frederick C. Whitney, Introduction to Mass Communication (Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Co. Publishers, 1983), p. 241.

[12]Marvin Smith, Radio, TV & Cable (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985), p. 206.

[13]A. C. Nielsen Co., 1982, in Smith, p. 207.

[14]Joseph R. Dominick, The Dynamics of Mass Communication (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1983), p. 277.

[15]Morton I. Hamburg, All About Cable (New York: Law Journal Seminar-Press, Inc., 1979), p. 355.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid., p. 354.

[18]Ibid., p. 355.

[19]Thomas F. Baldwin and D. Stevens McVoy, Cable Communication (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1983), p. 129.

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[22]Ibid.; Ault and Emery, p. 252.

[23]F. Leslie Smith, Perspectives on Radio and Television, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), p. 107.

[24]Lynne Schaefer Gross, Telecommunications, 2nd ed. (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Publishers, 1986), p. 168.

[25]Ibid.

[26]Ibid.

[27]Borowski, p. 28.

[28]John R. Bittner, Mass Communication, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), p. 135.

[29]Black and Epstein, p. 204.

[30]Black and Whitney, p. 207.

[31]Ibid.

[32]Sydney W. Head, Broadcasting in America, 3rd ed. (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976), pp. 184-185.

[33]Agee, Ault, and Emery, p. 247; Samuel L. Becker, Discovering Mass Communication (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1983), p. 308.

[34]Herbert H. Howard, Michael S. Kievman, Radio and TV Programming (Columbus, Ohio: Grid Publishing, Inc., 1983), p. 76.

[35]Smith, p. 203.

[36]Dominick, p. 262 (caption).

[37]Howard and Kievman, p. 76.

[38]Ibid., p. 72.

[39]Facts on File 1977 (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1977), p. 366 (May 14, 1977).

[40]Howard and Kievman, p. 67; Robert Campbell, The Golden Years of Broadcasting (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), p. 253.

[41]Howard and Kievman, p. 72.

[42]Head, pp. 216-217.

[43]Ibid., p. 218.

[44]Howard and Kievman, p. 77.

[45]Smith, p. 203.

[46]Howard and Kievman, pp. 76-77.

[47]Ibid., p. 77.

[48]Borowski, p. 28.

[49]Ibid.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

[52]Compaine, p. 50.

[53]Ibid., p. 176.

[54]Ibid.

[55]Borowski, p. 28.

[56]Ibid., pp. 1, 28.